

March 2016

## **Differing perceptions of migration**

***Andrew MacDowall***

*Input Paper for the IEPN Meeting in Budapest on 17 March 2016*

The migrant – or refugee – crisis has revealed and deepened rifts as great as almost any to emerge in the European Union’s six-decade history. This has occurred when the Union faces some of its biggest challenges, combining to create an atmosphere of existential angst: the eurozone crisis, the war in Ukraine and uncertainty over responses to it, and the potential departure of the United Kingdom (“Brexit”).

In some ways, these crises have interacted and reinforced one another. The refugee crisis is seen by some as one of the factors most likely to influence a “Leave” vote in the UK, while Germany’s supposedly compassionate response to non-European migrants has been contrasted with its firm line with its own European partners to the south. Russia’s actions in Syria are seen by some as exacerbating refugee flows to Russia’s advantage, while also further re-asserting Moscow’s position as a powerful actor not only in its “neighbourhood” (Ukraine), but in its areas of traditional influence (Syria, indeed the Eastern Mediterranean).

There have been repeated calls for a “united European response” to the crisis from politicians, officials, international agencies, and journalists, who see a continent-wide problem that needs a continent-wide solution. There are practical and ideological reasons for this: the crisis involves many European countries, including member states, candidate states, prospective candidates, as well as neighbourhood states outside the continent. Ideologically, some feel that welcoming refugees fleeing violence and persecution is the embodiment of “European values”.

But such a “coordinated response” has not been forthcoming, largely because of the wide range of different views taken on the crisis by the 28 EU member states,

and 26 Schengen countries. What is telling is that two of the most effective actors of the whole crisis – two leaders who have made a great impact on the course of refugee flows and in setting terms of opposing sides in the debate about how Europe should respond – are two who have acted unilaterally, albeit with substantial support from elsewhere in the continent in both cases. Those leaders are Germany’s Angela Merkel, and Hungary’s Viktor Orban. Leaving aside value judgements of their decisions, Merkel’s public willingness to accept refugees, and Orban’s building of a fence to keep migrants out, have been effective.

They also exemplify, probably intentionally, two opposing views of the refugees. Merkel’s is that these are people fleeing war, who must be welcomed to Europe and protected by Europe, but also that they are people who can contribute to the continent’s economy as its population ages and its dependency ratio worsens (cynics say that her “invitation” to 1m migrants is merely an economic calculation made in the knowledge that Germany will need more migration sooner or later).

Orban’s public view, however, is that these are largely economic migrants who have already passed through safe countries. What is more, as they are predominantly Muslim, they present an existential threat to the European way of life and European values over the longer term – and in the shorter term, some may be terrorists who are a threat to life and limb on European soil.

One of the problems in finding a European solution to the crisis is the gulf in views. For her most hard-line opponents, Merkel’s policy is sheer lunacy, the suicide of a continent; for his opponents, Orban’s behaviour and rhetoric towards refugees brings the politics of the 1930s back to Europe.

Orban’s stance has been particularly public and perhaps particularly forceful because of Hungary’s original position as the re-entry point to the EU from the Balkan Route, and arguably also because he faces a growing challenge from the hard-right Jobbik party. But it is not an outlier among the 28 member states, as became clear during a February meeting of the Visegrad countries – Poland, Hungary, and the Czech and Slovak Republics.

At this meeting, the countries’ leaders issued a [statement](#) saying that strengthening the EU’s external borders was “top priority”, putting an emphasis on regain-

ing control of frontiers and “stemming the migratory flows”, in opposition to the open-door policy embraced by Germany. The Visegrad Group had long been thought of as a mere talking-shop, with divisions between the countries becoming particularly stark in the wake of the Ukraine conflict, with Poland and Hungary at opposite ends of the EU spectrum in their views on the best approach with regard to Moscow. But on migration, they spoke with one voice.

According to one view, those not willing to accept refugees, or only accept them in very small numbers, are in contravention of European values.

This argument has been made most starkly against those countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) which have refused to take refugees in large numbers, and publically criticised the policy of welcoming refugees. For the liberally-inclined in Western Europe, this is a sign that the likes of Poland and Hungary are willing to participate in the EU for economic reasons, enthusiastically using Brussels funding and benefitting from the single market, but balk at the moral and political obligations of membership.

The feeling that CEE sees the EU as a “one-way street” with economic benefits and various rights, but minimal responsibilities, is not a new one, having already emerged in criticisms of Hungary’s domestic and foreign policies under Viktor Orbán, and indeed of Romania and Bulgaria’s foot-dragging on tackling corruption and organised crime (criticisms rarely directed at southern EU members with their own corruption problems – until recently). However, the CEE response to the migrant crisis has strengthened the perception, and broadened it to include countries such as Poland, previously something of a poster-child for European integration.

But it is clear from the Visegrad statement that they, too, feel that they are upholding “European values”, but that they define these values differently, with the maintenance of borders a priority.

“With the very foundations of the European Union at stake...the key strategic objective now is to preserve Schengen, which can only be achieved by regaining control over the European Union’s external borders.”

For CEE societies which in the main have not had large-scale non-European immigration, an influx of migrants is seen by many as a threat to things that are seen as an essential part of their European identity: social cohesion, the social contract, and Christianity and European culture. There is also a perception of security risk, that has only been heightened by the recent Paris and Brussels attacks. Whatever one thinks of these views, merely dismissing their expression by elected representatives as xenophobic populism has had little effect, other than perhaps strengthening the resolve of politicians and irritating more voters already annoyed by perceived Brussels heavy-handedness and elitism.

It is not just relative unfamiliarity with non-European migration that has made Central and Eastern Europeans more sceptical. Radko Hokovský, executive director of the European Values think-tank in Prague [identifies](#) four factors, some specific to the current crisis. Firstly, the perceived failure of integration of Muslims in Western Europe (by contrast, for example, Ukrainian migrants, some refugees from Donbass, have integrated well into Polish society). Secondly, a perception that the open-doors policy is chaotic, and that a better solution would be tackling the root cause, conflict, and providing help closer to home (this partly linked to a perception that Muslims should remain in the Middle East). Thirdly, a feeling that those reaching CEE or even the Balkans have already passed through safe countries, and thus are economic migrants, and a feeling that international law should be abided (Hokovsky adds that the people of CEE have none of the colonial guilt of the Belgians, or the war guilt of the Germans). Finally, a perception that migration is not needed in their economies.

Clearly, some of these factors are not exclusive to CEE countries, but also apply to Western European countries, some of which are becoming increasingly sceptical of immigration. The CEE governments certainly have a degree of populism in their approach, in that they are riding a tide of scepticism towards Brussels and the liberal-leaning urban elites of Europe, a tide that is felt across the continent from Portugal to Sweden.

In a sense, Brussels' and Germany's efforts to win CEE over to its arguments have been fairly unsuccessful; instead, substantial sections of Western European electorates are converging towards the Visegrad view. Indeed, perhaps not just

electorates – the EU’s deal with Turkey on the return of some refugees and migrants to Turkey, effectively closing the main route to Europe, is not far off what the Visegrad Group proposed in February.

One could add another factor, which is apparent particularly in the Balkans: a historic hostility to Islam following centuries of Ottoman rule. That Ottoman rule was often tolerant of local Christianity is not an argument that gets a great deal of traction in countries that saw specific taxes on non-Muslims and were subject to the practice of *devsirme* (the taking of the first son for military service), however distant in time those practices were. The national liberation struggles of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries contributed to a perception of Muslims as the “other”, and even potential oppressors in the future.

An election poster for the hard-right Ataka party in Bulgaria’s 2009 election depicted the Eiffel Tower surrounded by the minarets from Aya Sofya (itself of course a church converted into a mosque and then deconsecrated altogether), with the slogan “if it wasn’t for us, Europe would look like this!”. Many countries in CEE have a popular history heavily featuring resistance to the Turks, or stopping them in their tracks.

During the wars of the 1990s in the Western Balkans, the concept of the “green route” through the Balkans was revived. This theory had it that the Balkans was the main route for Sunni Islam to “enter” Europe, first through Ottoman conquest, and then by stealth through the creation of Muslim-dominated states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. However flimsy and fringe this theory, there are certainly those in Central Europe and the Balkans who see the Balkan refugee route as the latest manifestation of the green route.

The irony is that CEE countries’ hostility to non-European immigration masks their lack of preparedness for the near future, when many will start to require immigrants due to labour shortages. In some cases, these are already acute due to emigration to Western Europe and elsewhere; repatriates redress this balance to an extent, but these are also ageing countries with growing dependency ratios. In most of the Balkans, unemployment remains a bigger problem than a skills shortage, but in Central Europe, the issue of migration may have to be addressed at some stage.

Poland is an interesting case in that it has welcomed hundreds of thousands of immigrants with little fuss, almost seamlessly covering various areas of labour shortage. But these arrivals are from Ukraine, a country with similar language and culture and much shared history (not always happy). This has allowed Polish politicians to evade the question of immigration – for now.

As speakers at the IEPN conference said, much of the debate regarding migrants in Europe at the moment is about borders and rules, with little consideration of what happens afterwards. While this is perhaps understandable in a serious crisis, the focus on frontiers and legality – which is particularly prevalent in CEE – cannot address the long-term issues of integration. While for the time being this is largely a challenge for Western European recipients of migration (and those in the Middle East already medium-term home to millions of Syrians), over the longer term it will become a challenge for CEE as well. Now may be the time to start preparing for it.

As the paper by Dr. Dvora Blum put it, responses to immigration can be cognitive or emotional. While popular responses to the migrant crisis have often been emotional (both hostile and welcoming) in CEE, the response to Ukrainians in Poland has been largely cognitive: these people are needed, and assimilate well. A cognitive response to immigration from outside Europe, or even the Balkans, may be less likely. But CEE countries have some limited time to prepare their societies for immigration, to decide what strategies to adopt, and how to promote integration.

Examples from Israel, as we heard, can be informative, in terms of the tone politicians take in discussing the issue, and – perhaps more realistically – work trade unions can do to ensure that migrant labourers are not exploited, and not used to undercut better-protected, better-paid local workers, soothing one of the major potential tensions created by immigration. Integration into the legal workforce also ensures that migrants are contributors to public services that are often patchy already, and which local people will be concerned about being put under strain.

In the short term, debate about migration might become more productive if those on both sides of the argument about “European values” acknowledge that the other side has profoundly-held views, however strong the disagreement is.

In the short to medium term, CEE governments' and electorates' approach to migration is unlikely to change significantly. Populist nationalists hold sway in much of the region, and a change in societal attitudes towards migrants deemed as "the other" (rather than welcome temporary workers from similar cultures) would take both political will and time. As most migrants to Europe head for the more affluent countries in the west of the continent, this need not be a major challenge for the near term. Those governments in the CEE which have acknowledged the demographic challenges they face have focused on boosting birth rates, rather than immigration. With public resources stretched, this may not be a long-term solution. But there is little sign of coherent immigration policies taking shape. The policies of the resurgent Visegrad group could be instrumental here; either in continuing Fortress Europe rhetoric or in evolving a more nuanced approach to immigration that takes into account the host countries' economic needs while acknowledging societal attitudes.

The countries of CEE often criticise immigration policies elsewhere in Europe. They have an opportunity to suggest a different model: but building walls and ramping up nationalist rhetoric is no long-term solution, particularly if refugees are indeed relocated to CEE countries. As several speakers noted at the conference, the precedent of the political and societal stigmatisation of "the other" in CEE societies is an appalling, tragic one. Ghettoising immigrants and minorities, rather than seeking to accept and integrate, would be the biggest security risk of all.

*Andrew MacDowall is a Central and Eastern Europe correspondent and analyst for the Financial Times, the Guardian and Politico*